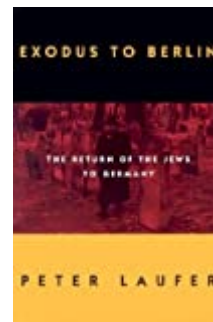




Peter Laufer. *Exodus to Berlin: The Return of the Jews to Germany.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2003. xii + 237 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-529-5.



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Since 1990, Germany has experienced a massive influx of Jews from the various successor states of the Soviet Union. Their migration has swelled the Jewish community's size from around 40,000 to approximately 100,000. With this book, the journalist and some-time travel essayist Peter Laufer analyses the phenomenon. As he notes in his preface (p. vii), many American Jews are uncomfortable with any Jewish presence in Germany, let alone the fact that the fastest-growing Jewish community in Europe is, in fact, in Germany. However, Laufer counters that this is "a story of hope, renewal, and redemption" (p. vii). He wrote this book to show the world how generous Germany and its government are to Jewish refugees (p. 198). Be that as it may, he spends much of the book focusing on the fear of violence and antisemitism. Moreover, he is exceptionally taken with the irony of German officials—or as he puts it, "the people with the guns"—welcoming and protecting Jews only two generations after their predecessors sought to exterminate them.

Laufer focuses on the post-Soviet immigrants to Berlin. Recounting their stories, he portrays a population that fled chaos, encroaching poverty, antisemitism, or even military conscription in the states of the former Soviet Union. Their presence in Germany, and especially in Berlin, has fuelled a renaissance in Jewish culture, or

in what many perceive to be Jewish culture (as noted by Ruth Ellen Gruber in *Virtually Jewish* (2002)). Laufer traces the aspects of his story through anecdotes and brief interviews, some well chosen, others seemingly random. His chapters draw out the individual aspects of the story, including official attempts to spread the idea of a multicultural and tolerant society, the attitude of old Jewish residents of Berlin and the aid of Jewish institutions, the question of who is a Jew, the fate of later migrants, the resurgence of neo-Nazism, non-Jewish demonstrators for tolerance and diversity, and the place of the immigrants in society.

One of the most interesting questions implicitly posed by Laufer is that of why, if Russian Jews want to come to Berlin so badly, when they do, most do not feel at home and believe they never will (in contrast to their relatives in America or Israel). A number of interviews indicate that the ghosts of the past weigh heavily on Russian Jews in Berlin, despite their love of the cosmopolitan and generally welcoming German capital. The presence of skinheads and political groups such as the NPD keep the past alive for the immigrants.

Laufer is utterly transfixed by neo-Nazi manifestations and right-wing violence. Much of the book is concerned with the NPD, skinheads, and societal responses to them. While this is a valid subject for inquiry, he fails

to examine innumerable other (non-Jewish) responses to the increased Jewish presence in Germany. The popularity of Jewish studies as an academic subject, public expressions of Jewish culture, and even conversions to Judaism receive little to no attention. That philosemitism, as well as antisemitism, has been resurgent gets lost in Laufer's focus on rightist extremism.

Virtually all of the post-Soviet Jews whom Laufer interviews had little connection to Judaism before leaving the former Soviet Union, as Laufer notes. For many of them, their primary identification is Russian. Others self-identify as Jewish because their national identity (e.g. Russian or Ukrainian) has broken down through migration to and cultural readjustment in Germany. Many have equally strong identities as Russians, Jews, and new Germans. Laufer brings out this multiplicity of identity well, and the reintroduction of Judaism (or not) to the lives of the Russian Jewish immigrants is a fascinating subject.

What Laufer does not clarify is exactly why this migration began. He notes that Russian Jewish migrants to Germany are usually granted "recognized asylum seeker" status, but he does not explain Heinz Galinski's talks in 1990 with then-chancellor Helmut Kohl which led to the authorities' position. While commenting on the historically stringent German citizenship laws, Laufer does not note the old West Germany's progressive policy concerning refugees. Regarding other immigrant groups, he notes the large Turkish population in Germany and the Vietnamese population inherited by the Federal Republic upon the GDR's dissolution.

Although the author wishes to portray the variegation of Jewish life in contemporary Berlin—and generally does—his story lacks historical context. A very brief overview of antisemitism and the Jewish presence in Berlin up to 1938 provides a framework for the reader with little previous knowledge on the subject, but the years 1945 to 1990 receive scant attention. Heinz Galinski's name does not appear once in this book's pages, despite his importance to the Berlin and national Jewish communities. Laufer does interview both Berlin city officials, such as Barbara John, and Jewish communal officials, such as Andreas Nachama, to explore the institutions that struggle to provide social services to the newcomers. Once unprepared for such an influx, the city and the Jewish community have put tremendous resources into accommodating and aiding the immigrants. Laufer (and Nachama) also consider the fate of those ex-Soviet Jewish arrivals who do not end up in Berlin, but rather

in smaller cities and towns across the country. Unfortunately, with the exception of those in Potsdam, the reader does not meet any or hear their stories.

The presence of the newcomers in the Berlin Jewish community is both welcomed and problematic, and Laufer endeavors to elucidate that seeming contradiction. In fact, Laufer implies that the ex-Soviet Jews are the new Turks, substituting economic advantages for cultural ones. They fuel Germany's cultural growth and claims to status as a cultural world power. Andreas Nachama points out, with good reason, that one cannot expect the immigrants to acculturate immediately. German Jewish refugees fleeing to America in the 1930s also faced difficulties adjusting. Nachama feels, and Laufer seems to share this opinion, that in ten or twenty years, the Russian immigrants will make significant contributions to German Jewish life. Though *Zentralrat der Juden* president Paul Spiegel is openly concerned about imposters claiming to be Jewish so as to gain permission to settle in Germany, he sees the immigrants as a chance to reintroduce much of what was lost to Germany under the Nazis. He hopes for a Jewish contribution to interconfessional relations, to science, and to economics. He does not want Germans to regard Judaism merely as klezmer music and bagels.

For background information, the author makes reference to scholarship such as Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland* (1987) for details on the Nuremberg Laws and Alexandra Richie's *Faust's Metropolis* (1998) for details on Jewish settlement in Berlin, rather than consulting books specifically on these subjects. This is a book clearly written for a popular audience. There are no footnotes, and the endnotes refer overwhelmingly to contemporary newspaper accounts. As noted, Laufer's research consists of interviews. Despite featuring a story thirteen years in the making, the book was likely written and produced in great haste. It was sent to reviewers in July 2003, yet the author describes events as recent as the German *Bundestag* elections of September 2002. Presumably as a result of this haste, the book suffers from poor copyediting and contains a number of careless errors. To name only a few, the Berlin *Bezirke* of Kreuzberg, Marzahn, Prenzlauer Berg appear as "Kreuzburg," "Marzan," and "Prenzlauerberg." Worse, the author places the date of German reunification as September 12, 1990.

While Laufer's story is interesting, it is likely already well known to subscribers of H-German. The reader gains the impression that the author wishes to show how "normal" or positive the new eastern Jewish influx to

Berlin is, both for Berlin and for the immigrants. However, Laufer's portrayal of a nearly omnipresent threat of xenophobic violence largely negates that effort. Moreover, this book's seemingly unsystematic collection of interviews and mistakes do not do it credit, and its account of the Jewish renaissance in contemporary Germany does not compare well with other, more sophisticated analyses.

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